

CEO to CEO: How San Antonio's Tobin Center Became a Performing Arts Powerhouse Without a Safety Net

6 MIN READ



Since opening its doors in 2014, the [Tobin Center for the Performing Arts](#) has become a cornerstone of San Antonio's cultural identity—both honoring its historic past and pushing boundaries with an ambitious, forward-thinking model. At the helm is President and CEO Michael J. Fresher, who brought with him decades of experience in venue management and finance from institutions like the Bushnell in Hartford and Madison Square Garden's Connecticut operations.

Under Fresher's leadership, the Tobin Center has redefined what a nonprofit performing arts center can be—operating without government funding, a Broadway series, or an endowment. With a lean full-time staff, a vast volunteer network, and an entrepreneurial spirit that includes ventures like Tobin Entertainment and 100A Productions, the Tobin is not only surviving in the post-Covid world, but thriving.

In this conversation, Fresher reflects on the center's unique origin story, its evolution through the pandemic, and how its "Something for Everyone" programming philosophy drives everything from McCartney to Mozart.



Michael J. Fresher
(image provided by the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts)

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Tell me about the Tobin Center and its history.

Back in 2007, we were the largest city in the country without a performing arts center. San Antonio had a theater, but it was a Broadway-style theater. So, the city, the county, and some very influential people in the arts community got together and decided that we needed a performing arts center. [It officially opened in 2014.]

Our model is a little different. We do not receive any government funding, which makes us unique in the non-profit Performing Arts Center space. We don't have a Broadway series. We don't have an endowment, which a lot of non-profits have. We don't have any of those safety nets, so we have to fundraise upwards of \$5 million a year. A lot of folks in our business will say it's impossible, but we've been doing it for 11 years and we've been pretty successful.

We are home to five resident companies, Opera San Antonio, Ballet San Antonio, and the Orchestra of San Antonio. We have a youth orchestra and a children's chorus. We average two events every single day, 365 days a year.

I'm curious how you've had to function differently than competing venues to operate at that volume.

A theater has *Hamilton* come in for three weeks to do 24 shows. We have to book 24 different shows, and every one of them has to move in and move out. Every show has a tech to build, every show has a marketing

plan. We have a great senior management team and staff. We only have 40 full-timers. The rest are part-timers, stagehands, event staff. We have a volunteer corps of about 600 that are our ticket takers. That's how we've made the magic happen here.

Our theme is Tobin purple. That's our color. We often talk about how our staff bleeds Tobin purple. It's a dedication to what we do.

We're limited in how many events we can do, because we only have 365 days, so we created another company called Tobin Entertainment in 2019, which books and markets shows in 35 states and 88 cities. There are acts and titles that we will put in our partner venues across the country, which is another way for us to generate alternate revenue. We couldn't do any of it without our donors and sponsors. We have a very strong philanthropic community here in San Antonio that has supported us from the beginning.



The exterior of the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts in San Antonio
(handout image)

What was the original building like?

The original municipal auditorium — that's the building that we transformed — was an icon in the community from World War II. Folks did their proms here, their graduations. There was a conscious effort to retain as much of that image as we could. There are three sides that were retained, almost like a Hollywood set, literally held up during the demolition. Inside that, our world-class performing arts center was envisioned and constructed. It was important that we keep the façade looking just like it did. We've tried to keep our connection to the old municipal auditorium as valid as we could.

How were you affected by Covid, and where are you now in relation to the before period?

We were probably the only performing arts center in the country that did not close during Covid, because Texas had different expectations of whether you needed to close or not, so we didn't. We kept most of our staff on, but we furloughed some because the problem we had at the time was getting content. You can be open all you want, but if there are no shows, what are we putting on stage?

We did a lot of Texas country music, with artists that could drive here. We did movie nights and invited the community in. When COVID happened, this phrase came out of nowhere, that no one ever heard about before called "social distancing". We had never heard of that. I went to my ops vice president and I said, "can our floor social distance? Could we get every other row to disappear?"

Usually when we can go to a flat floor, we can go to various configurations where the seats kind of flip underneath into the basement, but it's all automated. In this case, could we make every other row disappear? Could we have 6 ft between each row? We could. So we set it up where every other row was hidden. Not just the tape across it, not just the sign that says don't sit here, gone. And then when we sold tickets to shows

during COVID, we would sell them by section. We were able to do that when nobody else could.

Additionally, we have Tobin Entertainment [a tour booker and promoter founded in 2019], and we were able to help other buildings get shows prior to reopening. With us operating and other centers not, Tobin Entertainment was able to pre-book these buildings that didn't have staff. It also occurred to me that if we owned our own content, we could be putting on performances, so we created 100A Productions. 100A is now in its second season of producing our own plays in our black box. It's all local artists, actors, stage managers, set designers.

The way we do business here is that we don't understand that we're just a small performing arts center. We think a little bigger. That's what our motto has been all along.



Inside the H-E-B Performance Hall, a flexible 1,738 reserved seat or 2,100 general admission capacity performance space with hall acoustics adjustable for acoustic and amplified music presentations. The main floor is convertible from traditional theatrical seating to a flat floor, capable of seating 600 or more for a banquet or cabaret-style concert seating.
(handout image)

I was looking at your list of performances from 2023. You have something to do with Mozart, and then two days later you have Alice Cooper. What does that say about your audience and the booking strategy, in terms of diversity of content?

That takes me back to 2014 when we opened the building. I did not want to do an opening night. So many people were instrumental in getting this building built and funded that if we did one big opening night, only 1,700 people could come. That boxed out a whole lot of other people, and that's not who we are.

We did 30 opening nights in a row. Every night was a different performance. The first performance was our local opera, ballet, and symphony on stage together for the first time ever. After that, all hell broke loose. Paul McCartney, Renee Fleming, Jason Mraz, Carlos Santana, every type of genre you could think of. I did not want this building to be come, out of the box, a temple to the high arts. That's not what San Antonio is. We have studied our ticket sales and we have sold tickets to every zip code in the US. We have sold tickets on every continent other than Africa.

Our unsung tagline is "Something for Everyone."